

Workplace generation gap: Understand differences among colleagues

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Does the old geezer you work with stubbornly refuse to accept change? Does the inexperienced, fresh-out-of-college know-it-all have you tearing your hair out?

Workplace tensions can arise when people of different generations — working side by side — don't understand each other. You can diffuse tension at work by learning about the differences among your colleagues, appreciating those differences and making an effort to interact with members of each generation in a way that suits their work ethic and communication style.

The generations in today's workplace: Who they are

People of today's workplace generations possess characteristics that derive, in large part, from the political, social and economic climate of their youth.

Traditionalists — Born 1900 to 1945

Sometimes referred to as the World War II generation, traditionalists have worked longer than any of the other generations. Experiencing two world wars and the Great Depression taught most members of this generation how to live within limited means. Traditionalists are loyal, hardworking, financially conservative and faithful to institutions. Many are approaching retirement or are retired and now working part-time jobs.

Baby boomers — Born 1946 to 1964

When the baby boomers entered the work force, they felt compelled to challenge the status quo, and they're responsible for many of the rights and opportunities now taken for granted. Their boundless optimism led many to fight for change. Because of their large numbers, they faced competition from each other for jobs. Baby boomers all but invented the 60-hour workweek, figuring that demonstrated hard work and loyalty to employers was one way to get ahead. Their sense of who they are is deeply connected to their career achievements. As a whole, this generation is politically adept when it comes to navigating political minefields in the workplace.

Generation Xers — Born 1965 to 1980

Generation Xers are technologically savvy, having ushered in the era of video games and personal computers during their formative years. But witnessing skyrocketing divorce rates, their parents being laid off after years of dedicated service and challenges to the presidency, organized religion and big corporations instilled a sense of skepticism and distrust of institutions. Because they don't expect employer loyalty, they see no problem changing jobs to advance professionally.

In contrast to the baby boomers' overtime work ethic, generation Xers believe that work isn't the most important thing in their lives. They're resourceful and hardworking, but once 5 o'clock hits, they'd rather pursue other interests.

Millennials — Born 1981 to 1999

Many in this generation are still in school, but the oldest millennials are recent college graduates just now entering the work force. These are kids who've had access to cell phones, pagers and personal computers all their lives.

Millennials are eager to learn and enjoy questioning things. They're confident and have high self-esteem. They're collaborators and favor teamwork, having functioned in groups in school, organized sports and extracurricular activities from a very young age. They reject the notion that they have to stay within the rigid confines of a job description. Expect them to keep their career options open. As opposed to generation Xers who change jobs, millennials are more likely to make entire career changes or to build parallel careers.

'Cuspers': Wedged between two generations

The birth years defining the generations aren't carved in stone. You might identify with more than one generation if your birth year falls near the beginning or the end of a given range of years. In that case, consider yourself a "cusper" — one who's on the cusp between one generation and the next.

Three such groups exist in today's work force:

- **Traditionalist/baby boomer.** Born around 1940 until 1945, members of this cusper group value the strong work ethic of the traditionalists. But some of these cuspers are also eager to challenge the status quo, a definite baby boomer trait.
- **Baby boomer/generation Xer.** Born between 1960 and 1965, these cuspers witnessed the success of their older baby boomer counterparts, but they themselves experienced the recession that plagued the early generation Xers. Computers didn't come into elementary and high schools until after they graduated.
- **Generation Xer/millennial.** Born from 1975 to 1980, these cuspers possess an interesting mix of generation X skepticism and millennial optimism. They're quite comfortable with technology.

Cuspers are a valuable resource in any work group. Because they identify with not just one generation but two, they can foster understanding between the two generations. They're often skilled at mediating, translating and mentoring.

Be wary of stereotyping: Not all traits apply to all members of a generation

Although certain characteristics may be attributed to one generation or another, that doesn't mean that all people in a particular generation exhibit each of that generation's common characteristics. Avoid rigid stereotyping.

How to bridge the generation gap: Steps to success

Now that you understand more about each generation, you're on your way to bridging the generation gaps in your own work environment. The formula for success involves three steps:

- **Be aware of the differences.** Acknowledge that everyone is different. Your colleagues' unique experiences influence their attitudes toward work.
- **Appreciate the strengths.** Instead of harboring frustration over differences, focus

on the positive attributes your co-workers possess.

- **Manage the differences effectively.** Once you've acknowledged the differences and taken time to consider the strengths of your co-workers, find ways to interact with them that will be mutually beneficial.

Baby boomers vs. generation Xers: Biggest potential for misunderstanding

Of the four generations, baby boomers and generation Xers comprise the majority of the work force today. An interesting dynamic is developing between these two groups as generation Xers move into management positions — and supervise baby boomer colleagues.

Fortunately, baby boomers and generation Xers can employ certain strategies to build better working relationships with each other.

Workplace strategies for generation Xers to use with baby boomers

If you're a generation Xer, you may be able to win favor with your baby boomer co-workers if you:

- **Show respect.** Acknowledge that you have less experience and can learn from them. You may be quite bright, but you can always learn something new.
- **Choose face-to-face conversations.** Many baby boomers find e-mail or voice mail too impersonal and prefer speaking with someone face to face.
- **Give them your full attention.** Multitasking may help you accomplish a lot during the day. However, if you're typing away at an e-mail while your baby boomer colleague is talking to you about a project, chances are you'll wind up at odds with that colleague. Giving your full attention at the times it's needed actually may be more efficient in the long run.
- **Play the game.** Workplace politics are a fact of life. As a generation Xer, you may be completely turned off by politics, but sometimes, you've just got to play the game. Baby boomers are diplomatic and particularly adept at navigating politically charged environments.
- **Learn the corporate history.** Unless you've been with a company since its inception, know that plenty of things transpired at the organization long before you set foot in the door. Find out what's gone right and what's gone wrong in the past — especially the lessons learned over the years. Nothing rankles a baby boomer more than a new employee who breezes in and wants to change things, with seemingly no thought given to what's gone on before.

Workplace strategies for baby boomers to use with generation Xers

If you're a baby boomer, rely on these tips to smooth interactions with your generation X co-workers:

- **Get to the point.** Avoid corporate jargon, buzzwords and cliches that obscure what you're really trying to say. State your objectives clearly when communicating with generation Xers.
- **Use e-mail.** Take advantage of technology in your correspondence with a generation Xer. Save meetings for issues which require face-to-face

communication, and use e-mail when the matter can be handled via a well-worded, concise written message.

- **Give them space.** Don't micromanage generation Xers. Generation Xers crave autonomy. Give them direction and then allow them to figure out the best way to get results.
- **Get over the notion of dues paying.** As a baby boomer, you worked 60 hours a week to get ahead. Maybe you started at ground level and worked your way up in a company. You think members of younger generations ought to do the same. But generation X — which values a healthy work-life balance — typically isn't spending that many hours in the office. And they're getting ahead anyway.
- **Lighten up.** Remind yourself that it's OK for work to be fun. Generation Xers tend to think you're too intense and set in your ways.

Traditionalists and millennials: Tips for working with these generations

Although most of your co-workers are probably baby boomers or generation Xers, you can benefit from learning strategies for working with traditionalists and millennials, too.

Working with traditionalists

Whether you're their manager or their peer, these tips may ease your working relationship with traditionalists:

- **Honor the chain of command.** Traditionalists have respect for authority and they expect it in return.
- **Offer them job security.** Traditionalists value the legacy they've built with your company.
- **Value their experience.** Use them as a resource to learn what has — and hasn't — gone right at the company in the past. Respect the insights they've gained from years of experience.
- **Appreciate their dedication.** Unlike the other generations, traditionalists are most likely to have taken a job and stayed with one company for their entire careers.

Working with millennials

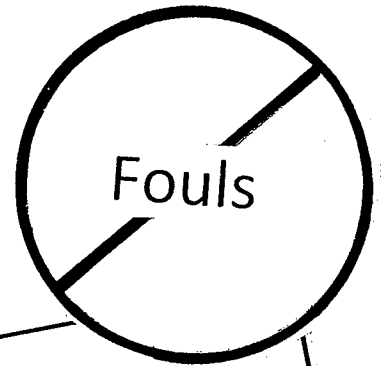
Enhance your working relationship with millennials with these tactics:

- **Challenge them.** Millennials want to work on things that really matter. Offer more responsibility as a reward for their accomplishments.
- **Ask them their opinion.** Millennials love to collaborate and be team players. They respond less enthusiastically to a dictatorial chain-of-command style of management.
- **Find them a mentor.** Millennials have an affinity and great respect for traditionalists. Establish mentor-mentee relationships between these two groups, and both parties will benefit.
- **Provide timely feedback.** Millennials are used to getting feedback instantaneously — at the touch of a button. In the workplace, they expect frequent, worthwhile feedback.

A little understanding, a lot more harmony

Rules For Fighting Fair

1. Identify the problem.
2. Focus on the problems.
3. Attach the problem, not the person.
4. Listen with an open mind.
5. Treat a person's feeling with respect.
6. Take responsibility for your actions.



- Name Calling
- Blaming
- Sneering
- Not Listening
- Getting Even
- Bringing up the Past

- Threats
- Pushing
- Hitting
- Put Downs
- Bossing
- Making Excuses
- Not Taking Responsibility